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### Brucellosis buffer zone shot down

By SCOTT McMILLION, Chronicle Staff Writer

A U.S. House committee refused Thursday to provide \$1.5 million to buy grazing rights near Corwin Springs and urge the federal government to establish a brucellosis buffer zone around Yellowstone National Park.

The funding was proposed in the form of an amendment to the House Agricultural Appropriations bill.

U.S. Rep. Maurice Hinchey, D-New York, offered the amendment during a meeting of the House Appropriations Committee, of which Montana's Rep. Denny Rehberg is a member.

But Rehberg strongly opposed setting aside the money. The committee voted it down.

"This amendment was not only bad policy, it was an abuse of the process," Rehberg said in a written statement released Thursday.

Rehberg also blasted the buffer zone plan, which Gov. Brian Schweitzer is pushing. The plan is to create a buffer zone in parts of Park, Gallatin and Madison counties, in which all cattle moving in and out would be tested for brucellosis.

"Create your buffer zone inside the park," Rehberg said in the committee meeting, in a video clip provided by his office. "It's the park's problem. Fix the problem inside the park."

Brucellosis causes pregnant cows to abort their fetuses. It causes a recurring fever in humans, but exposure is relatively rare and limited primarily to livestock producers and veterinarians.

Montana, which ranks sixth in the United States for total number of beef cows, is on probation for two years because brucellosis was found in a herd northeast of Yellowstone in May. The state will lose its brucellosis-free status if further cases turn up in those two years.

Hinchey's amendment noted that the federal government paid \$13 million in 1999 to buy land north of Yellowstone from the Church Universal and Triumphant. However, the deal

didn't include the grazing rights on the church's remaining property. Because cattle remain there, bison aren't tolerated, even on public land adjacent to the church's Royal Teton Ranch.

In 2000, several state and federal agencies created the Interagency Bison Management Plan, which calls for bison eventually to be allowed on parts of the church's property, at least in the winter, and for cattle to be removed.

State officials, along with some private groups, have been negotiating with church officials for about two years, trying to find a way to establish more tolerance for bison on the west side of the Yellowstone River.

Hinchey, who has been active in Yellowstone bison issues in the past, offered the measure as a rider to the ag bill. It "strongly urges (the U.S. Animal and Plant Health Inspection Services) to make available \$1.5 million from available funds" to help obtain the grazing rights. The rider also urged the agency to work with Montana to create the buffer zone.

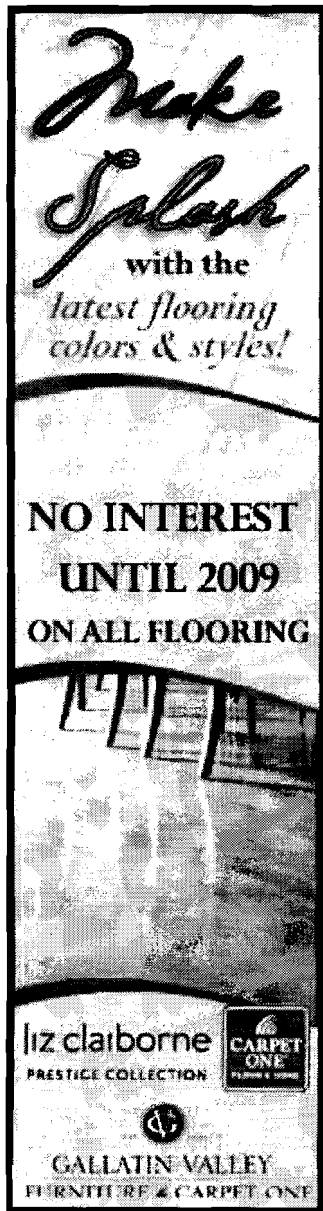
APHIS officials have already said they're willing to work with Schweitzer on creating the zone.

But Rehberg said the buffer plan is just "creating a bigger problem by trying to create some kind of false zone" around the park.

"Not all of Montana is in love with the governor's proposal," Rehberg said.

Mike Volesky, Schweitzer's top natural resources advisor, declined to comment on the defeat of the Hinchey rider.

Rehberg said he's willing to discuss brucellosis eradication, but prefers a different process.



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